DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 445 CS 209 235

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TITLE Making Sense: Writing from Objects. A Smithsonian Approach.
INSTITUTION Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Descriptive Writing; Elementary Secondary Education; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Based on courses showing teachers how to use many kinds of objects to teach writing and stimulated by ideas from teachers across the country, this booklet contains suggestions for helping students improve their writing. The booklet discusses writing about objects as a process involving the following steps: making observations and gathering data, trying out hypotheses (making guesses) and exploring relationships among ideas, checking to see if the evidence supports the conclusions and if the logical relationships among ideas are clear, asking others to read a draft to check its clarity for readers, incorporating others' suggestions or one's own new ideas into other drafts, and correcting a finished draft. (EL)

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Making Sense: *Writing from Objects*

A SMITHSONIAN APPROACH

by Thomas E. Lowderbaugh

Designed by Stephen Kraft

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Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
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1984

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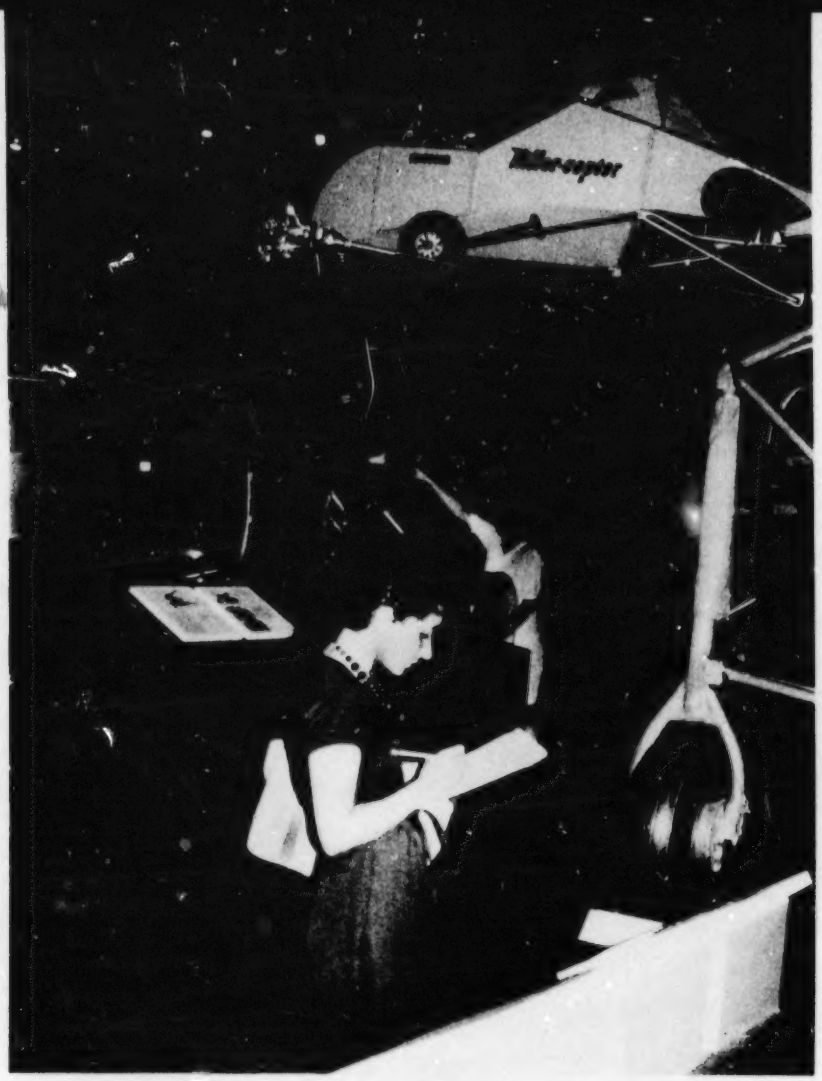
Home to approximately 100 million objects, the Smithsonian Institution wants to help teachers learn how to use objects to enhance their students' education. The Smithsonian's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education has since 1978 offered courses designed to show teachers how to use many kinds of objects to teach writing. This packet is based on that work, stimulated by the exchange of ideas with teachers from across the country. We hope that these materials will assist you in your work, helping your students improve their own writing.

Objects excite us. In fact, we enjoy some objects so much that we collect them—antique cars, quilts, china, beer cans, photographs—almost anything that pleases and intrigues us. As any parent or teacher knows, children are fascinated by objects, too. Kids make their own collections of things—sea shells, stones, baseball cards, dolls, coins, or stamps.

By *objects* we mean any kind of *real thing* that can be manipulated, collected, displayed, and looked at in many ways. Objects surround us, ready to spark our minds and enflame our curiosity if we let them. Their teaching potential is limited only by our imaginations.

In the classroom, objects can be used to inspire and motivate students to write. Objects are solid, physical subject matter that students can see and touch, play with, and ask questions about. The students' writing can grow out of their encounter with something factual and objective.

Writing about objects can help students develop a wide range of skills, especially observation, inference, reasoning, and making judgments. It also exposes students to the same kinds of challenges we all face when we encounter anything new or unfamiliar. By giving students a chance to write from such materials, we give them a chance to practice skills we use every day. And because we encourage them to *write* and not just *talk* about the objects, they are able to develop their ideas in detail. By looking beyond or beneath the surface, they become experts, to some extent, on a certain subject, and by writing of their discoveries they learn how to express their ideas so they make sense to others.



Pick an Object

Let's take a simple example of writing about an object and follow the writing process. You might, for example, bring an unusual gizmo into your classroom, such as a butter churn, an apple corer, or an old-fashioned can opener. Be sure not to tell your students what it is.

The key at the beginning—as it may be in all teaching of writing and perhaps in all teaching—is *slowing down the students*. They will probably think they are ready to write finished papers in minutes or even seconds after they first see the object. This kind of superficial preparation leads to wild guesses, to sloppy and shallow rough drafts masquerading as final drafts—to the kind of product that drives teachers batty.

The Critical Eye

Have your students take the time to look and think before they actually start writing their papers. Ask them to work as detectives, carefully examining the object, trying to figure out what it is, how it's used, and how it works. Have them make a list of all they can discover about the object:

- *What is it made of?*
- *What are its dimensions?*
- *Which parts are connected? How?*
- *Which parts move? In what ways?*
- *What geometrical shapes does it have? How many? Where?*

As they gather data based on close observation they will begin making guesses on what it is and does. What you want your students to do is put their first guesses aside until they have some solid data. Even then, they should treat their hypotheses as just that—as tentative and not unalterable conclusions.

The First Draft

Now that your students have made their lists and jotted down hypotheses of what the object is, they are ready to begin a draft. Ask them to write a piece describing the object and explaining how they think it's used, making sure they provide sufficient detailed explanation so that someone who has never seen the object can draw a picture of it from just reading the paper. They may even wish to argue for a particular use for the object, or they may wish to explain how they cannot answer the questions they have posed about the object. Encourage them to go back to the object to look at it again and make sure they have all the evidence they need to describe and explain it to the reader. Whatever conclusions they draw, they must be able to point to the evidence that the reader will need to imagine the gizmo. In the process, encourage your students to try out words and sentences, using different approaches, crossing out the ones that don't work.

Checking for Clarity

While working on the draft, students may occasionally need to show their work to their classmates, asking them whether a sentence or a paragraph makes sense. After finishing a draft, they will definitely need to ask classmates for reactions and suggestions. Of course, vague questions are useless. Students acting as readers need to focus on specific questions such as "Are all the important parts of the gizmo mentioned?" "Are they de-

scribed accurately?" "Are the materials identified?" Then: "As a reader, do you understand the description? If not, where *exactly* do you get confused? Could you *draw* the object from this piece of writing?" (To make this assignment and its challenge more realistic, you might arrange to send the papers to another class whose members will each be assigned a draft from which they will draw a picture according to the information in the paper. When the original papers are returned—with the drawings attached—the authors can discover just how well their papers really worked. How much does that drawing look like the gizmo the paper described?)

Even adults find pointed questions hard to answer about writing, so we should not expect youngsters to come up with perfect answers. What we are doing is training the students to think clearly and critically and to write accurately.

Now, having had their work checked by others, your students can evaluate their work in light of the critiques they have received—including those highly useful drawings—and turn to improving their work.

Ready to Rewrite

Now comes the hard part: getting students to make changes in their writing. (Remember: students complain about having to work through this step for a good reason: it is hard for everybody, children or adults, to revise and correct their writing.) What we are doing here is helping students learn how to check their writing. Is it accurate to the facts of that gizmo? Does it do the job intended? Do the sentences work? Are the words appropriate? But, more important, in this process, we need to help them discover *why* writers need to check their writing to revise it: to make sure that their readers will understand what they are trying to say. One reason that this process of rewriting is so hard is that rarely do student writers know what repertory of changes they might draw on for solving a particular writing problem. By helping them learn about these options and helping them discover solutions to specific problems, we can make the writing/editing/revising process easier.

Students need to understand that editing, revising, and proofreading are different ways of looking at writing:

- *Editing is making sure that the writing faithfully reports the facts, showing relationships among ideas and the like.*
- *Revising is the process of making changes to clarify the writing so the reader will understand the writing clearly and quickly.*
- *Proofreading is the process of making sure the finished piece meets certain standards of correctness, such as spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.*

These processes show the writer how to put ideas together in a new way from one draft to another. And the first two—editing and revising—are fundamental creative acts in all writing. They offer us opportunities to make sure that readers will understand the new text. Proofreading, on the other hand, deals with readers' expectations of correctness. A writer who ignores proofreading standards or decides they are not important risks offending a reader. Like sloppiness, errors convey the message, "I don't care about you," even if that message is not deliberate or intended.

You may want to reassure your students by telling them that every writer—every good writer—has to rewrite, usually working over a draft several times. Best of all, share your own writing with your students, letting them see how many drafts you have to work through, helping them understand that what you say grows out of your own experience with writing.

Summing Up

Students don't need to work through the entire process for every paper—observing, note-taking, composing, rewriting, and proofreading. In fact, when working on an assignment you may wish to concentrate on just one or two steps. But in the long run, students need to understand that all of the above steps are required to produce a *finished* piece of writing.

This process is not linear: we do not go neatly from point A to point B to point C, and so on. Instead, we circle back, checking data; checking out hypotheses; scrapping sentences, paragraphs, or whole pages as necessary as we gain new understanding and new insights from the process.

As an ongoing process, writing leads to discovery and learning. In this way, a writer is like a scientist who says, "I wonder what would happen if I added A to B . . .?" To find out, she does just that. Whether something happens or not, she wins because she gets an answer to her question. Similarly, a writer constructing a text performs a series of experiments: "Does this sentence belong here? Maybe I could put the prepositional phrase at the beginning? No, that doesn't seem to work. What if I start the sentence with *however* and then . . .?" What matters is not putting down the "right" answer; what matters is discovering what, in a specific context, works and what doesn't.

Writing from objects is not the only way for students to explore the writing process. But it is one valuable way for them to practice their writing and to develop skills. As students learn from their writing experiments, as they discover what works and what doesn't, we may think of the serious eagerness of a child fascinated with a set of blocks or with his own collections of objects—sitting there engrossed in his explorations of the physical world around him. Children naturally use this same kind of process to learn on their own. At its best they call it playing. Working with objects may help students learn how to play with their writing.

The Process: Step by Step

By helping to free students from premature concerns about the finished product, writing about objects may help them see writing as a process made up of the following steps:

- *making observations and gathering data.*
- *trying out hypotheses (making guesses) and exploring relationships among ideas—in short, beginning to make sense.*
- *checking to see if the evidence supports the conclusions and if the logical relationships among ideas are clear.*
- *asking others to read a draft to see where it is clear—and unclear—to readers.*
- *incorporating others' suggestions or one's own new ideas into other drafts.*
- *correcting a finished draft.*

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to my many colleagues who were kind enough to read this text in manuscript and who gave me the benefit of their advice. Ann Bay, Director of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, offered guidance, direction, and encouragement; other colleagues—especially Bobbi Bedford, Janice Majewski, and Ruth Sheets—generously reacted to the text and made valuable suggestions.

I also want to thank the members of the 1984 National Seminar, who provided me with a wealth of advice, always reflecting the daily realities of the classroom. In addition, I want to thank Professor Michael Marcuse of the University of Maryland, who—under severe time constraints—read and commented upon this manuscript.

Finally, I want to give credit to Barbara S. Kraft, who, as editor, cleaned up my copy and helped me make sense.

None of these readers, however, should be held responsible for any opinions expressed in this booklet.

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